

# PEOPLE - FARRELLY

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### **Article Heading**

Farrelly, Peter; and Farrelly, Bobby

Peter Farrelly Dec. 17, 1956- Screenwriter; director; producer; novelist Bobby Farrelly 1958-  
Screenwriter; director; producer

Farrelly, Bobby

Farrelly, Peter

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In the 1990s the films of Peter and Bobby Farrelly spawned the genre of "gross-out" comedy, in which few subjects are taboo; films such as Paul Weitz's *American Pie* (1999) and Todd Phillips's *Road Trip* (2000) have since gone to great lengths to outdo the plethora of memorably outrageous comic episodes that made the Farrelly brothers' *Dumb and Dumber* (1994) and *There's Something About Mary* (1998) popular. Although the Farrelly brothers typically build visual gags around bodily fluids, physical handicaps, and imperiled domestic animals, there is an undercurrent of gentleness and sentimentality in their films. Audiences have connected with their work: in part because of its emphasis on characterization and the filmmakers' display of sympathy for the underdog. "The people we laugh at in our movies are those who aren't nice," Bobby Farrelly told Mr. Showbiz (on-line). "They're the bad guys. The joke is usually on them. The nice people [also] have things happen to them, but it's just the foibles of being human, like the embarrassment of going through life. It's not anything personal." Although some reviewers have raised objections to the Farrelly brothers' willingness to push--or cross--boundaries of good taste, the films appear to be critic-proof. "There's two lines," Peter Farrelly explained to Jess Cagle for CNN.com (July 27, 1998). "There's a line that the critics will tell you is there. And then there's the real line. And the real line is what we go towards. We never cross that line. . . . We know when we cross the line. That's when they don't laugh, because the audience won't laugh if it's truly mean-spirited." The often scatological nature of their material harkens back to the vaudeville tradition, in which working-class characters used humor as a means of dealing with the difficulty of everyday life. Jeanine Basinger, the chair of the film-studies program at Wesleyan University, who includes *There's Something About Mary* in her American film comedy class, told John Brodie for *Gentlemen's Quarterly* (June 2000), "[The Farrelly brothers] are to the year 2000 what Preston Sturges was to 1944. They are the freewheeling, antiestablishment voice of comedy. In Sturges's day, a lot of people found him utterly vulgar, and now he seems like the height of sophistication." The Farrellys are so determined to make their audiences laugh that they test-screen each film and have eliminated sequences based on the comments they receive. "Nobody tests movies more than we do," Peter Farrelly told IGN Movies (June 22, 2000, on-line). "I don't think there's anyone in the business who does. . . . We get so much feedback from just listening. You know when someone's finding it funny and when they're not. So we show it ten times or so before we even show it to the studio."

Peter and Bobby Farrelly endeavor to make the film set a comfortable environment for actors, hoping

that they will thus feel free to experiment. "Our feeling is that the most important thing on a set is that actors have enough confidence to try different things," Peter Farrelly told Anson Lang for *Bold Type* (June 1998, on-line). "If there's stress or tension they won't go out on a limb because they won't want to embarrass themselves if they don't feel completely comfortable. . . . Even the best actors, like Jim Carrey and Bill Murray--these guys will hit it 8 or 9 out of 10 times, they'll be on something incredibly funny, but 1 out of 10, 2 out of 10, they'll fall flat on their faces. That's what makes them great actors . . . they take those chances, they don't play it safe. It doesn't always work, but if you're on a comfortable set, you don't mind failing, because you know you're among friends." Wild hairdos and tacky clothing feature prominently in the brothers' 1996 film *Kingpin* and *There's Something About Mary*, and the characters engage in physical comedy that some actors might find humiliating. "To me, [the Farrelly brothers'] genius is that they get actors to do things that you never thought you'd do," Ben Stiller, who starred in *There's Something About Mary*, told Kendall Hamilton for *Newsweek* (July 20, 1998). "Not until months later, when you see it up on screen, do you realize what you've done."

The Farrelly brothers labored for nearly a decade before they sold their first script, completing 15 unproduced screenplays and doctoring many more for big studios. They have since become one of the most popular comedy teams in Hollywood and have established a production company, Conundrum Entertainment. Discussing the brothers' partnership, Bobby Farrelly told Jess Cagle, "I think the reason it works first of all is there's a different level of trust. And basically we both share the same vision. It's a warped vision, but we share it. And I think that we're able to protect that vision more, because the people that come at you try to get you to water down what it is that you see." Since they first achieved success, with *Dumb and Dumber*, the Farrelly brothers have found work for their friends, who frequently appear in their films and sometimes direct their screenplays. (They have cast amateurs as actors, but their directors are professionals.) They take pride in being "the anti-Coens," Peter Farrelly told Kendall Hamilton, a reference to the highly regarded filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen, who are also brothers. "Nobody analyzes our films--and we don't want them to."

Peter John Farrelly was born on December 17, 1956 in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. Bobby Farrelly was born in Cumberland, Rhode Island, in 1958. They grew up in suburban Cumberland with their father, Robert, a doctor; their mother, Mariann, a nurse; and three sisters. Peter and Bobby Farrelly shared a room, played sports together, and spent time with the same group of friends. When he was a senior in high school, Peter Farrelly had a relationship that would play a large part in his decision to become a writer. "Her name was Cordo," he told Jeff Giles for *Newsweek* (July 3, 2000). "She was on every level a tremendous girl: gorgeous, kind, athletic, cool. And then I broke her heart the next year. . . . I did all the bad things. I was just scared. We didn't talk for a year, and then right when we were thinking about getting back together, she fell out of a car and died. I certainly don't want to use her as some . . . romantic thing that happened to me in my childhood, but she never knew how crazy I was about her, and her death really affected me. . . . When I became a writer, it was really to write something about her." Peter Farrelly received a B.A. degree in business from Providence College, in Rhode Island, in 1979. After graduation he spent a few years as a salesman for U.S. Lines Inc., a shipping company. When his employment there ended, he suddenly found himself without direction, and he decided to pray for guidance. It soon occurred to him that he should write about his life experiences. Farrelly began filling notebooks with story ideas and succeeded in entering the graduate creative-writing program at the University of Massachusetts. In 1984, after one year there, he transferred to the writing program at Columbia University, in New York City, where he collaborated with Bennett Yellin, a friend whom he had met at the University of Massachusetts. Together they wrote a comedy entitled "Dust to Dust," about a Mafia-run funeral home; although it did not sell, the screenplay caught the attention of the film director David Zucker and the comedian Eddie Murphy. In 1985 Peter Farrelly left the East Coast for Los Angeles, where he worked on scripts for Paramount, Columbia, and Disney. He received an M.F.A. degree from Columbia University, through correspondence courses, in 1987. In the following year he published a novel, *Outside Providence*, about his apparently brief experience at a boarding school. Bobby Farrelly attended Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in Troy, New York, where he played hockey and received a B.S. degree in geological engineering. "I was like a knucklehead, I barely stayed above

the grade-point average where they throw you out," he told Mim Udovitch for Rolling Stone (July 6-20, 2000). "But all the time I was there, little did I realize, all the parties I went to, I was doing research." Like his brother, Bobby Farrelly went into sales following graduation, and he later invented the Sun Spot, the world's first circular beach towel. "The theory was that, as the sun moves, rather than move your towel--you just move your body," Peter Farrelly explained to Jeff Giles. "But it turns out that people don't mind moving their towel. They like to stretch out now and then." Although they did not live near one another, Peter Farrelly often sought his brother's advice. "For about two years, every time [Yellin and I] wrote a screenplay I'd send it off to my brother because I trusted his instincts with comedy, and story . . .," Peter Farrelly told Alson Lang. "Finally after a couple of years of this I felt like we were taking advantage of him, because he was doing a lot of the work but he wasn't getting any credit, so we ended up writing a screenplay with him, and it was our best one." That screenplay, for a sequel to Dragnet, was never made into a film. The trio worked together until 1992, when Yellin left California.

The Farrelly brothers made money by touching up screenplays written by others; meanwhile, over a 10-year period, they collaborated on 15 ultimately unproduced scripts of their own. They were pleased when a script they had written for the popular television program Seinfeld was produced in 1992, but they yearned to make their own films. "Eventually our agent told us, 'Pick out your best script, make up your mind you're going to make this movie no matter what happens, and just tell people it's going to get made,'" Bobby Farrelly told Mr. Showbiz. "He convinced us to attach ourselves as directors and make the movie--raise whatever [funding] we needed, and then something might happen." The Farrellys found the break they were looking for when Jim Carrey, the comic actor then best known for his work on the TV show In Living Color and the film Ace Ventura: Pet Detective (1994), expressed an interest in appearing in the film, which was entitled Dumb and Dumber. "That night we called David Zucker, who we'd written a script for," Peter Farrelly told Jeff Giles, "and we said, 'We're in a nightmare situation. We're beginning a major motion picture, and we don't know what we're doing.' He said, 'Relax. Just be honest with your crew. If you pretend you know what you're doing and you don't, they'll let you drown.' So we worked out a signal with our first assistant director, J. B. Rogers. When I was supposed to yell 'Action,' [Roger would] signal me, and [when the shot was completed] Bobby would yell 'Cut!'" Peter Farrelly made his directing debut with the film, which stars Carrey and Jeff Daniels as dim-witted roommates who have various misadventures while traveling to Aspen, Colorado. Co-written by the Farrelly brothers and Bennett Yellin, Dumb and Dumber earned over \$340 million worldwide, making it one of the largest-grossing films for a first-time director in the history of cinema. Peter Farrelly found directing to be "the biggest scam in the world," he told Kendall Hamilton. "I wish everybody could direct one movie because you know what? Everybody could." Peter and Bobby Farrelly then co-directed Kingpin, a comedy about a former bowling champion (played by Woody Harrelson) who attempts to recapture his glory by coaching an Amish man (Randy Quaid) with a talent for the game. The release of There's Something About Mary, which the Farrellys co-wrote, co-produced, and co-directed, solidified the brothers' reputation as purveyors of the "gross-out" comedy films that were so vilified by critics--even as audiences flocked to them and other filmmakers struggled to replicate their success. "We never thought this would appeal to everyone," Bobby Farrelly told Jess Cagle. "And, you know, some people just don't get it." There's Something About Mary stars Ben Stiller as Ted, an unpopular teenager who is surprised when Mary (Cameron Diaz), one of the most beautiful girls in his class, agrees to accompany him to the prom. But their date is brought to an abrupt halt when Ted catches his genitals in his zipper and is taken from Mary's home by ambulance, as most of the neighbors look on. (Like many scenes in the Farrelly brothers' films, the notorious zipper sequence was based on a real-life occurrence.) Years after losing touch with Mary, Ted finds himself unable to forget her, so he hires a private investigator, Healy (Matt Dillon), to look for her. But Healy himself becomes obsessed with Mary, who is unaware that the two men--among others--are competing for her affections. The comic set pieces in There's Something About Mary involve masturbation, the abuse of domestic animals, and mental retardation. Although many critics focused on the shocking aspects of the film, the Farrelly brothers won over audiences by populating the story with flawed but likable characters. Peter

Farrelly told Ian Caddell for Reelwest.com that the scene in *Mary* he found "most memorable" is the one in which Healy, reporting back to Ted about Mary, "lies to him, saying 'she's 250 pounds and she's on welfare and she has a bunch of kids and she's in a wheelchair.' . . . And [Ted] says 'I don't care.' That's what makes the movie, because you feel [Ted] deserves her. Anyone can fall in love with Cameron Diaz. So what! Why should you root for that? But when he doesn't care what she looks like years later, that's what makes it work." Some took issue with the film's portrayal of Mary's brother, a mentally disabled man who becomes violent whenever anyone touches his ears. But the Farrelly brothers have insisted that the humor in his scenes grows naturally out of the situations in which the characters find themselves. "It's not malicious in any way," Cameron Diaz told Jess Cagle. "We're not making fun of mentally challenged people. We're making fun of the people who make fun of mentally challenged people."

Peter Farrelly's second novel, the semi-autobiographical *The Comedy Writer*, was published in 1998. The story is narrated by Henry Halloran, a struggling Hollywood screenwriter, who has seen a woman jump off a building to her death and writes about the experience for the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*. Discussing the incident that inspired the novel--Farrelly's unsuccessful attempt to talk a woman out of jumping from a roof--Farrelly told Marcus Dunk for the *London Daily Express* (March 25, 2000, on-line), "In the piece I mentioned that before she killed herself, I asked her to have coffee with me so she could talk about what was bothering her, and after the article came out, I was contacted by about 30 to 40 seriously depressed people who were also suicidal, asking me to have coffee with them. I ended up running all over southern California for about three weeks meeting with people and just listening to them all while I was trying to write comedy. . . . I was really disappointed that I hadn't helped this woman more. I tried, and it could have gone either way, but it didn't go the right way so when these people called I was really open to them. But on the other hand, I changed my phone number, so it wasn't like I wanted to do it for a career. But in any case it gave me the idea for this book." *The Comedy Writer's* many comic situations are counterbalanced by serious themes, such as the difficulties encountered in relationships.

The following year saw the release of a movie based on Peter Farrelly's first novel, *Outside Providence*. Co-written by the Farrellys and directed by their friend Michael Corrente, the film stars Shawn Hatosy as Timothy Dunphy, a working-class teen whose father (Alec Baldwin) is forced to send him away to a private school when the son gets in trouble with the law. (Corrente had purchased the novel for one dollar in a used-book shop in East Hampton, Long Island, and later bought the movie rights for the same amount. "[Peter Farrelly] wrote about this white trash kid from Pawtucket, and that was me," Corrente told Dana Kennedy for the *New York Times* [August 29, 1999]. "It sounds goofy, but that's what moved me so much about the book. It was my story.") Although the film was more serious than the brothers' previous work, it was marketed as an outrageous comedy, over Peter Farrelly's objections.

The Farrelly brothers' film *Me, Myself & Irene* (2000) stars Jim Carrey as a mild-mannered man who, after years of putting up with humiliation and abuse from others, develops a split personality. Both his meek self and his new, aggressive side pursue Irene (Renee Zellweger) romantically. *Say It Isn't So* (2001), produced by Peter and Bobby Farrelly and directed by J. B. Rogers, is a comedy about incest and mistaken identity. The brothers' film *Osmosis Jones*, is a partially animated comedy about a battle between a group of germs and the immune system of a man who eats a tainted meatball. The film, directed by the Farrelly brothers and starring Bill Murray and Chris Rock, was released in August 2001. It was followed in November by *Shallow Hal*, about Hal Larson (Jack Black), who, in his quest for physically perfect women, epitomizes shallowness. After an unexpected encounter with the self-help guru Tony Robbins (playing himself), Hal sees women's inner beauty rather than their bodies. He falls in love with Rosemary (Gwyneth Paltrow), a kind, humorous, 300-pound Peace Corps volunteer who, in his eyes, is shapely and beautiful. "This movie is anything but an affront to heavy or unattractive women," Peter Farrelly said, as quoted on *Premiere* (on-line). "Our goal has always been to make a movie that's funny and sweet and ultimately a tearjerker." Some moviegoers, however, complained that the filmmakers had muddled the idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and had failed to properly convey the message that character is more important than looks. On the other hand, the film critic A. O.

Scott of the New York Times (November 9, 2001), observing that Shallow Hal is "comparatively restrained when it comes to bodily effluvia and leering dirty jokes," went on to add, "The most shocking thing about it may be its unabashed sincerity. There are enough moments of demented comedy to make you aspirate your popcorn, but by the end you may find yourself, with some amazement, sniffing back tears."

Peter and Bobby Farrelly live in Duxbury, Massachusetts--Peter with his wife, Melinda, and Bobby with his wife, Nancy, and their two children. -- C.L.

#### **Works by subject**

Selected Films by Bobby Farrelly: as director--Kingpin, 1996; as writer and producer--Outside Providence, 1999; as writer and producer--Dumb and Dumber, 1994; as director and producer--Osmosis Jones, 2001 as writer, director, and executive producer--There's Something About Mary, 1998; as writer, and director, and producer--Me, Myself and Irene, 2000; Shallow Hal, 2001

Selected Films by Peter Farrelly: as director--Kingpin, 1996; as producer--Outside Providence, 1999; as writer and director--Dumb and Dumber, 1994; as director and producer--Osmosis Jones, 2001; as writer, director, and executive producer--There's Something About Mary, 1998; as writer, director, and producer--Me, Myself & Irene, 2000; Shallow Hal, 2001

Selected Books: by Peter Farrelly--Outside Providence, 1988; The Comedy Writer, 1998

#### **Works about subject**

Suggested Reading: Gentlemen's Quarterly p150+ June 2000, with photos; New York Times II p9 Aug. 29, 1999, with photos; Newsweek p64+ July 20, 1998, with photos, p54+ July 3, 2000, with photos; Rolling Stone p94+ July 6-20, 2000, with photos

#### **Descriptor**

screenwriters-; directors-; producers-; screenwriters-; directors-; producers-; FILMMAKERS-; WRITERS-; nonfiction-; nonfiction-; Farrelly-Bobby; Farrelly-Peter; Farrelly-Peter; and-Farrelly-Bobby

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